

Zoom time trials and triumphs

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Abstract

The paper outlines some of the challenges and successes experienced by music teachers during the 112-day COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne during 2020, using the experiences of music staff at Scotch College, Melbourne, as a case study.

Key words: Remote Instrumental Teaching, Zoom, COVID, Pandemic

Introduction

The move to remote learning was clearly going to be a major challenge for music education. Fortunately, the first lockdown in March provided an opportunity to learn some techniques and get used to the required technology. However, the second, and much longer, lockdown presented different challenges as the 'novelty' factor had well and truly been eradicated, and everyone knew that they were in for a long and indefinite period of remote teaching and learning.

Music was in a much more vulnerable situation than other subjects in schools. While it is true that class music lessons are compulsory (from Preparatory to Year 8 at Scotch), instrumental lessons are not. The great fear was that parents would elect to 'pause' individual lessons until after the pandemic, or indeed terminate lessons completely. Another issue was that some students (particularly those at the more elementary or intermediate levels) need the regular ensemble rehearsals to maintain motivation, and so might well cease their instrumental studies. This certainly happened with a few students, and I know from colleagues in other schools that they experienced the same problem. It might well be another two or three years before the full extent of the pandemic is shown in ensemble numbers, particularly the bands.

Data collection

Scotch is a large school with significant numbers involved. Some 1,300 individual instrumental lessons (including voice) are taught each week by a staff of more than 80. All staff were invited to contribute to the paper, and given some suggested areas to comment upon:

- issues and difficulties, and how these were overcome
- how you motivated the students
- bright ideas that worked brilliantly
- what worked and what didn't
- how you handled parental negotiations
- how you coped yourself during the lockdown, and how you maintained your own motivation and morale.

A large proportion of the staff responded, often with highly perceptive observations as well as some positive solutions. However, there were staff and management challenges to solve, and these are discussed below.

Methods of delivery

The actual teaching at Scotch was largely delivered through Canvas using Zoom as the video link. There was some important discussion around Child Safety (for the school generally, not just Music). Essentially, however, given that the lessons could be (and were) recorded and delivered through the

school's platform, there really was no significant risk to teachers or students. Furthermore, the teacher delivering the lesson could not know if a parent was watching that lesson (out of sight of the camera). Parents received some guidance regarding appropriate places for the lessons within the home, and requesting that students be appropriately attired. Some schools insisted that students wear either school or sports uniform, and that teachers wear professional attire as they would at school. We did not specify this.

Music teachers teach in close individual contact as a matter of course. Why would the child be in greater danger when they might be three suburbs away, the lessons recorded and the parent could be listening to or watching the lesson?

Parental concerns

A number of parents were highly sceptical about the validity of remote learning. I was able to reassure most by informing them that I was at a conference about this a few years ago at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in China, and saw extremely successful lessons being given from Denmark. I added that a few years ago, one of our cellists undertook all his lessons by video from his preferred teacher who lived in Sydney. The boy concerned gained a high VCE mark in music, and performed a concerto at his final concert at Hamer Hall. I was also able to assure them that my two private students, one undertaking Grade 8 and the other LMusA, had been taught via Zoom for most of the year and had made perfectly good progress. Not all parents were convinced, but most were. A great many were extremely impressed by the quality of the teaching being delivered (something they had not been able to observe previously), and, as a result, became extremely supportive of their child's music studies.

Staff concerns

A number of staff were concerned about the use of the technology, and some required a great deal of personal support in setting everything up. We were

able to supply microphones where required, and this assisted the sound quality.

With respect to payment for sessional teachers, we assured all staff that they would receive their usual payment, as long as they were prepared to teach. A letter I sent to the staff said:

As we are now closed, at least until next term, the option to teach at school has obviously passed.

First of all, I want to register my appreciation for you with respect to these new challenges that we have all had to contend with. I have received several appreciative emails from parents regarding video lessons, and watched a few really good ones. Nevertheless, I also feel for those of you who have a fear of technology and all things digital. Could I please urge you to see this as an opportunity to 'upgrade' your digital technological expertise (as I have had to!). The priority is to find ways to engage and educate our students, and to maintain motivation (and, frankly, ensure that there are still students to teach when the pandemic is over). It can be done, and done effectively (as has been demonstrated brilliantly in Denmark), but it will necessitate a change in thinking and approach – and might well enhance your teaching in the long term!

I am assuming that everyone will want to give video link teaching a fair chance. If you really do not want to (and therefore not be paid for the lessons that you would otherwise have given) please let your Head of Department know immediately so that your students can be passed to another teacher.

Some guidelines:

Please teach at the scheduled time (as if you were at school). If you are trying to contact the student for a lesson and the student is not there, you can email a reminder or call the parents at home.

On a case-by-case basis, should a student wish to take advantage of a possible 'out of class time' lesson, and you can adjust the teaching time to one that is mutually convenient, you are most welcome to do so. However, you should not feel compelled to oblige unreasonable requests (e.g., Sunday at 8.30 am, or 8.30 pm for that matter!).

The general rule to staff is that lessons should take place in the course of a normal school day. You can extend this a little if it is more convenient for you and the student, but not beyond 5.30 pm. In all cases, please keep careful records of attendance (as you would at school).

Please do not agree to students coming to your home (or to visit the student's home). It is against the spirit of isolation, and could place you in a vulnerable position.

With respect to sectional teaching or Suzuki classes, etc, you will be paid for these, but please put the time to good use – string players might be asked to edit or bow some music, brass teachers to transcribe a trombone part from Tenor Clef to Bass. You could use the time to hit the net and find out some creative ideas for online teaching. For those of you teaching AMEB (brass, for example) you could make up recordings of orchestral excerpts.

You could try asking your students to give a live video performance to each other (a small group on Zoom, for example) and comment on each others performances. You could encourage them to give a recital to their grandparents online (if the grandparents have any idea how to receive this!). The possibilities abound!

Please share bright ideas!

Please try and stay positive, and stay in contact.

Maintaining staff morale was obviously very important. Some Heads of Department held virtual 'afternoon teas' (others preferred afternoon drinks!). In all cases, maintaining contact was of the utmost importance.

Specific areas

Class teaching

Lessons were delivered through Canvas, often using Zoom through Canvas. The school set up protocols (for the sake of consistency, as much as anything else).

VCE lessons were fine. The students were motivated by the need to be successful. Some aspects of individual teaching were more difficult,

and (owing to the nature of Zoom) class discussion lost some of the spontaneity that one generally enjoys. Performance practice was less successful because the tone quality was often reduced (and poor internet connection was another issue in some cases). Also, there was the lack of ability to work with an accompanist. Nevertheless, the class performed well at VCE.

Junior secondary (Years 7 and 8) needed greater imagination from the teacher. One teacher's response was:

We used the cloud-based notation software Noteflight for a range of composition tasks including:

- Composing hero and villain music as part of our Film Music Unit
- Exploring instruments of the orchestra and writing for a variety of orchestra instruments
- Combining our knowledge of scales and rhythm to create original melodies.

We used discussion boards on Canvas for students to:

- Respond to music they have heard.
- Comment on their classmate's compositions.

Some tasks that worked particularly well were:

- As part of our unit on Baroque Music, students used Noteflight to create a four-bar melody in the key of C Major. They exported their melodies as MIDI files and posted them onto a discussion board. I took four midi files at a time and imported them into a session using Logic Pro Software. Students selected an instrument from the baroque period and I created an ostinato from each midi file using the instrument of their choice. I layered each ostinato so that a new pattern began every four bars. Students enjoyed hearing their melodies as part of a complex final product of four interweaving melodic patterns. This exercise was a fun creative task that demonstrated how complex polyphonic music can be made by layering simple homophonic melodies.
- Students used handwritten notation to compose a rhythmic piece and posted a photo

of their work to a discussion board. Students recorded themselves performing each of their classmate's compositions and responded to the discussion boards by posting their recordings.

Junior School teachers had some very positive solutions:

I put time into creating video teaching segments and sourced support materials from the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Also found some delightful YouTube videos to post. Then there were worksheets with teaching support audio instructions and/or video demonstrations on Seesaw. This involved much work, and sadly there was only a 2/3 take-up at most.

By contrast, the Zoom classes were enthusiastically embraced, and I was entertained by the students joining in (from the bottom bunk bed in some cases). Kodály-Curwen hand signs were a blessing and a silent way of showing an answer, or rehearsing a melody together. It was easy to observe singing behind the camera, the intake of breath, for example. I invited individuals to turn the sound on and this was hugely popular. Who doesn't want to be a TV star? Parents often wandered past and sent some lovely feedback about hearing their sons sing at home, so this was beneficial in supporting our class program. This also gave them an opportunity to observe my teaching style, and this also prompted enthusiastic feedback.

Another Junior School class teacher wrote:

- I liked to use technology in the classroom. **Chrome music lab (song maker)** was great fun. Students used this to 'notate' their known Kodaly pieces on to the virtual score, placing in the melody, making up a tonic/dominant accompaniments, and then adding a percussion parts to add to the fun. Students could notate their pieces and then save them. From there, the link could be pasted into a Seesaw Activity or into the Google Classroom.
- **Flipgrid** is a fantastic way of showing students work. Flipgrid is so good, because as a teacher you can allow individual students' work to be

seen by just the teacher or the whole class, you can allow students to comment or not comment. There are so many features and it is so user friendly. I used Flipgrid to create class concerts where students recorded individual performances. If I wanted to use this for assessment, the videos could only be seen by me and there was actually an assessment add-on that could be used.

I really felt that the lockdown forced teachers to work outside their comfort zone and try (embrace) new things. I was quite amazed how I was still able to get my curriculum across, but in different ways. I used **Groove Pizza** to create backings for raps, I did a course on how to use CANVA and create interesting posters and seesaw activities.

As with many schools, Scotch has a class instrumental program. This includes Suzuki classes in the Junior School. One teacher wrote:

We ran Suzuki group classes on Zoom, which kept our community in contact. We had fun playing games, doing bow and rhythmic exercises. Kids played along with a teacher or recording with piano accompaniment, while on mute. Teachers pre-recorded an archive available for our students via Dropbox of repertoire from Suzuki books 1 to 5 for viola and violin. Recordings were played at a slow practise tempo and used continually as a "Play along with the teacher" exercise. We pre-recorded a lesson on each piece in the Suzuki repertoire, available on Dropbox. So, students could watch and play along with a lesson based on any piece from books 1 to 4. Students had time to listen to recordings of repertoire during lockdown, so phrasing and dynamics often improved.

An enormous amount of work went into this. I am exhausted just remembering it ... but I also feel rewarded!

With older students (Years 5–7), there was the opportunity to use more sophisticated measures. For example, one teacher would often set the students a piece, and then allocate boys to breakout rooms (as can be done on Canvas). The students could start

working through the piece, helping each other, and the teacher went from room to room to help each group. Also, if a student had a question, he just sent a message on chat, and the teacher went straight to that room.

Individual teaching

Responses from individual teachers varied considerably. However, a common thread was the fact that tone quality was very hard to monitor and correct, despite a number of students purchasing microphones. There was a Zoom upgrade to 'Hi-Fi', and many certainly found that helped once the students got it working. However, dynamic variation was hard to gauge and many teachers reported that the students were not playing loud enough, or using sufficient breath support once face to face teaching resumed towards the end of the year.

Technical issues remained problematic throughout in a number of cases. As one teacher wrote:

- The quality of Australian NBN is very low.
- The varying quality of student computers was an issue.
- Apple has best built-in microphones .
- Windows was usually of a lower quality.
- Unfortunately, the audio quality of video communication programs is optimised to the very narrow dynamic and pitch range of speech.
- For music, Zoom was the best, with its options optimised for music.
- Microsoft Teams does not work for me.
- Best solutions were achieved by using external microphones and speakers at both ends.

Solutions included pragmatic advice about making sure that the computer was ready early, and having the school's tech-support on 'speed-dial'! Many students, despite being familiar with computers since primary school, were surprisingly inept at sorting out technical issues and settings. Some teachers found 'positives' in unlikely situations. As one wrote:

A few students had internet connection problems

and we quickly learned about Advanced Settings at the start of lessons. Having said this, a boy moved house temporarily and never quite sorted out the wi-fi issues! Some came week after week with an iPad – wholly inadequate to the tasks involved, and one boy's iPad kept falling down so I'd end up seeing a huge chandelier on the ceiling instead of my student and his clarinet! With these issues I was emailing parents (as well as copying them in on student emails) asking them for their help with relocating rooms, sorting internet issues, etc, and, as most were working from home, we all got to know each other better! I met lots of lovely dogs and cats who often came to lessons or were fetched in to meet me!

There were some great positive outcomes. First of all, there was the increased practice and teaching time – no excursions to interrupt lessons, no sport, no travel time. As a result, most teachers found that their more self-motivated students improved dramatically during the lockdown. Nevertheless, some students lost their direction through lack of peer support and ensemble rehearsals. The inability for teachers to adequately play duets with their students was another problem. However, a number of teachers pre-recorded their part of a duet, and the student was able to play along with it. Not ideal, of course. As one teacher wrote:

The absolute inability to play along (simultaneously in real time) with the students was a real downer, and if a student turned up with an instrument that had a minor problem that could normally be fixed immediately, no joy there either.

There were examples where students responded well to the challenges:

I asked my students to take responsibility for writing in their own music record books. They seemed to enjoy this role reversal and writing their own notes helped them to better understand the technical points and what they were aiming to achieve in their practice.

I also asked my students to accurately mark their own music with bowings, position changes and fingerings, etc. I would normally do this for them

but I found this increased their ability to read and understand musical notation.

A further common thread was that the students welcomed the one-to-one lessons on Zoom as it was one of the few times in the week where they could receive that attention. As a result, many teachers got to know their students, and the parents, better.

One general comment from a violin teacher:

The main difficulty for me was the ability to accompany the students to prepare them for exams. To compensate for the lack of me being able to play with them, I prepared backing tracks in Garage Band and recorded me playing over the top. For motivation, a game I did quite often was called “frog mid tip” which is what it sounds! The boys started with their bows in the air and I called out frog, mid or tip and timed them. They had to place their bow on the string silently and move as quickly as possible – it became quite competitive with the boys asking each week who was leading so far! I also created a ‘practice competition’ where students filled out a form of when they practised and what they practised, filling out a section for scales and technical work, pieces and orchestral preparation. During lessons I asked them to mute themselves so we could play together and during that time, I recorded myself playing certain passages under speed to help with tricky sections, etc.

I also created orchestra repertoire videos and put them on YouTube. I recorded these in Zoom so the boys were able to see the markings I had put on the music and started the videos by going over tricky section or discussing them, followed by me playing their part. These weren’t accessed as much as I would have liked, but I did them!

One piano teacher wrote:

It was more difficult to teach younger students online rather than older students, especially when learning a new piece. I could see the family’s involvement and parents’ support very well, especially with the younger students. It was quite interesting to see different parents’ attitude towards their child’s music learning. Some parents were incredibly involved and

constantly helping the child (learning together is a fantastic process!) However, there were also some uninvolved parents sitting in the room as if they were not there!

Students had to adjust their learning attitude to be more involved because they had to listen carefully to be able to copy what I played. They also had to write the fingerings in their books by themselves. I used two cameras: one at the top of the piano showing only the keyboard from the top (kids loved ‘Mr Piano’). My hands were seen well. The second was on the side of the Piano to show my face, posture and my hand position from the side (‘Ms Rainbow’) It was also used for the theory card games and white board writing games.

From a pure teaching perspective, a number of procedures emerged that might well continue permanently. Many teachers found themselves giving much better written feedback for lessons, as one wrote:

To keep track of my students’ progress, I created a Google doc for each one. This replaced the practice diary and provided us both with certainty about what was expected. I also created an electronic scale chart to track progress in technical work (normally I do this on paper).

I digitised all my music repertoire (at least the music used in syllabuses). This has revolutionised my teaching. I saved it in the Notes feature on my iPhone, catalogued into grades. Within the grades, catalogued into lists.

I engaged a pianist to record accompaniments as needed, and this has enhanced my teaching.

When Zoom teaching, I followed what the students were playing on my iPad (because I had my music digitised) and, with an Apple Pencil, made annotations that I went back on after they had finished playing. This was a huge step forward for me.

With a ‘weaker’ student who usually was only interested in polishing up his band music (quite common with older students), I digitised all my ‘popular’ repertoire and sent him the music week

by week so he would have something nice and new to learn.

Ensembles

Obviously, the lack of ensemble playing was a real problem for motivation. However, a number of ensembles produced some remarkable 'virtual ensemble' recordings. The Brass departments produced an excellent performance of Janacek's *Sinfonietta*, the Show Band presented a concert, the strings produced an elaborate work that used different string ensembles at different levels brought together to produce an outstanding performance, and the Chamber Choir also produced some wonderful performances, as did the percussion department and the drum-line, and Pipes and Drums. However, these virtual ensemble recordings require a massive amount of technical time and work to bring to fruition, and are not a real substitute for coming together in a live rehearsal or performance.

Examinations

A number of teachers found that preparing students for high level examinations was unsatisfactory. However, one of my own students received a distinction for Grade 8, but I think we were 'saved' by the fact that the lockdown ended before the exam, and the couple of live lessons (plus the accompaniment) enabled various matters to be addressed. The on-line recital exams did not always go well – a number of families had technical difficulties. That said, the AMEB certainly did its very best to accommodate a vast number of issues, uncertainties and re-scheduling. It was clearly very challenging.

Teacher wellbeing

A number of staff reported that they had a sore back and neck from looking at the computer screen for too long. One suggested that it was important to try and talk to an adult at least once a day! Ensuring some exercise was also considered important. Most

of the single teachers found the solitude to be largely satisfactory – connections with friends and colleagues via Zoom was welcomed but when one has been on Zoom for most of the day, the idea of spending more time on Zoom did not always appeal!

Conclusion

As indicated from the responses above, along with my own observations and those of my colleagues, there were some definite frustrations. High-level teaching was difficult because the subtleties of rhythmic precision, tone control dynamic variation and phrase shaping were all much more difficult in a remote environment, especially as Australia is not as well served as Europe in terms of the internet. There was also the difficulty of connecting students with accompanists. Nevertheless, the fears that many students would cease their instrumental lessons proved largely groundless.

There were also positive outcomes. The increased practice time worked well for many students. New approaches to teaching were found, and some of these will find a regular place in the teaching repertoire. Parents gained a renewed respect for the professionalism and sheer skill of the teachers of their children. Children also benefitted in some cases. One perceptive teacher wrote: 'I have noticed a big difference in the behaviour and concentration of the students after the lockdown. The students who were having lessons online became more involved and focused. Even once face-to-face lessons resumed, these students continued to take notes and corrected all the mistakes on the spot.' Finally, the renewed enthusiasm from everyone to attend concerts and support music generally is something to be welcomed warmly – many people did not realise just how much they would miss it, until it wasn't there!

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